The Present Situation*

L. N. Mishra

My friends working in the Indian Railways

It is now nearly three and half months since I took over as Minister of Railways and thereby became a member of the large family of 17.5 lakh railwaymen.

During the course of our short association of fourteen weeks or so with the railways, I had toured extensively all over the country with a view to study the working of the Railways at zonal level on one hand and of the living and working conditions of the railway employees on the other.

I have no doubt in admitting that consequent to these visits, I felt convinced that there was room for improving the living and working conditions of the railwaymen and their families particularly in the field of accommodation, education, medical attention and several other spheres.

I accordingly initiated some immediate measures in this regard. Some of these steps are already in the process of implementation.

Friends, however, there is yet another issue of national importance which needs our immediate attention. We are all aware that presently our country is passing through a very critical economic phase out of severe drought conditions, particularly in the States of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Mysore and Rajasthan. We have got to rush foodgrains and essential commodities to these scarcity hit areas to save human life.

I have accordingly decided that the entire railway system should be geared on a war-footing for the movement of foodgrains to the drought affected deficit States. I am glad that, with your active cooperation, we have been able to register an all-time high in the matter of movement of foodgrains. Presently, we are moving about 1400 wagons per day from Punjab and Haryana to the deficit States as against about 900 wagons that were normally being moved.

*Broadcast by Shri Lalit Narayan Mishra, Minister of Railways, at 20.25 hrs. on May 26, 1973, from Delhi Station of All India Radio.

Because of the shortage of electricity, the demand for coal and petroleum products is also today greater than ever before. With the low stock of coal in power houses and shortage of oil in certain areas, we can ill-afford any disruptions in the movement of these essential commodities at this critical hour. Despite heavy movement of foodgrains, we have maintained the level of coal movement at 7400 wagons per day.

Friends, I could venture to commit the Railways to this gigantic task of movement of essential commodities on a war-footing only on the basis of the assured cooperation and proud traditions of the Indian Railwaymen. Who does not know the pivotal role played by the Railwaymen during the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan? In fact, during every national crisis and emergency, Railway has invariably risen to the occasion and acquitted itself with credit in achieving what the nation demanded from it. In the backdrop of these glorious traditions, I am grieved to see that when the entire railway set up had applied itself wholeheartedly towards this national task, some section of the loco-running staff on the Western, North Eastern and North zones of the Railways have resorted to agitation which is taking the shape of 'work-to-rule' and 'work-to-designation' campaigns and mass absenteeism. Some of the firemen, shunters and assistant drivers are refusing to work on officiating duties in the higher grades on trains as well as on shunting engines in the yards. This is resulting in full crews not being available for working trains and shunting engines in yards which are not working normally. Yard working is slowed down and wagons in the affected yards are immobilized. Goods trains are not able to move out of the yards to the main line and on to their destinations. Many passenger trains are running late. It has also become necessary to cancel some passenger trains.

Although the impact of this agitation and dislocation is being felt all over the country, it is particularly adverse on vital movement of foodgrains, oil and coal on the Western, North Eastern and Northern Railways.

There may be grievances, many of which may be genuine, which sections of the railwaymen may be having. I can assure the railwaymen that I will look into each one of them as, in fact, I had already started doing after assuming charge of the Railway Ministry. But, this is not the time when anyone of us can afford to adopt methods which disrupt and dislocate the lifeline of the nation. I request the members of the Railway Protection Force also to rise to the occasion and ensure speedy and regular movement of essential items.

When a vast majority of railwaymen were cooperating and working hard for ensuring the movement of essential commodities, a small section of railwaymen was attempting to disrupt these movements by intimidating

the workers. For ensuring movement of essential items vital for the survival of our countrymen, it has been decided to ban the strikes on Indian Railways for a period of six months by invoking provisions of Defence of India Rules. I would like to assure all concerned that this ban is meant exclusively to ensure movement of essential items and is not intended to be used against the interests of the vast majority of the cooperating railwayman. I hope my friends will view the promulgation of the Defence of India Rules in the light in which it has been inducted.

Solution of intricate problems particularly those concerning personnel which give rise to conflict of interest, requires careful thought and discussions at all levels.

Our country has to have time to recover from the conditions of drought and scarcity we are passing through. I, therefore, make a personal appeal to all the railwaymen to maintain normal movement of traffic smoothly and on a war-footing at least for the next six months. Let us keep the interests of our nation to the forefront ! Let us not forget that if the country is in trouble each one of us will have to bear its brunt. I am sure railwaymen will accept the task and give as high an account of themselves as they have always done so far in the service of the country.

JAI HIND!

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